

Rural issues

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Background

- The countryside is often presented in an unrealistic fashion; a rural idyll of a green and pleasant land. A place of relative affluence, to which people can escape for leisure and recreation; where a strong sense of community prevails and life is lived at a gentler pace. Many people aspire to live in this 'idyll' and policy makers allow it to influence their thinking and planning.
- The reality for many people and communities is very different. The countryside is a workplace for those engaged in a wide range of industries including farming, tourism and a multitude of small businesses. Around 20% of rural households in England live on or below the poverty line but this deprivation is dispersed and often hidden.
- The average age of those living in the countryside continues to rise and young people find it increasingly difficult to remain in their own communities. According to the Commission for Rural Communities, at the end of June 2009, 40% of 16-24 year olds in rural areas were unemployed or economically inactive.
- Lack of affordable housing is one of the most serious challenges facing rural communities. There is less social housing and council housing available and it is projected that demand for new housing will grow at a faster rate in rural districts than in urban districts over the next two decades.
- For rural communities to be vibrant and sustainable attention also needs to be given to the provision of a range of services such as transport, healthcare, education, broadband, job centres and training schemes.
- Food production remains a very significant activity in the countryside and farmers are expected to produce more food in a more efficient and sustainable way. Some sectors of the industry are experiencing considerable pressure, especially dairying and uplands livestock production. Food security, care for the environment, animal disease, fairness in the supply chain and the potential loss of traditional skills are just some of the challenges to be faced.

Issues

- **Poverty and Deprivation** – If all those living in poverty in rural England were located in one community it would be the size of the Birmingham conurbation and there would be an outcry. Rural poverty, however, is dispersed, easily ignored and requires imaginative, tailored and creative solutions, which may prove costly.
- **Young People** – For many young people it is not a viable option to live and work in a rural community. Lack of appropriate, affordable housing, jobs, broadband and transport all conspire to make rural areas unappealing and inaccessible to young people.
- **Affordable Housing** – There is insufficient housing to rent and houses to buy are too expensive. Often there is a specific lack of smaller housing for single people or couples. Sometimes there is opposition to affordable housing from within the community. For this chronic problem to be overcome a strong political will is needed.
- **Access to Services** – Rural areas present significant challenges to service providers. It can be less economically viable to make services accessible, so imaginative solutions have to be found. Living in a rural community should not necessarily result in isolation, exclusion and disadvantage.
- **Food and Farming** – There are incentives for farmers to care for the environment but sometimes disincentives to actually produce food, due to the narrow or non-existent profit

margins delivered by market forces. How to address animal disease, especially Bovine TB, remains a controversial issue but continues to cause stress and distress in the lives of many farmers, as do the complexities and inefficiencies of the current system of support payments.

Questions

- What imaginative and creative solutions do you have for addressing rural disadvantage?
- How will you make living in rural communities more appealing and accessible to young people?
- What will you do to provide more affordable housing in rural areas?
- How will you increase accessibility to services and are you committed to meeting the extra costs this may incur?
- How will you encourage food production and ensure food security, alongside management of the environment for conservation and recreation?
- Churches have a presence in every rural community. How will you support the work they do in offering social and pastoral care for those in need and in using their buildings for the benefit of the whole community?

Further Information

The Revd Graham Jones, National Rural Officer for the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church, The Arthur Rank Centre

Email: grahamj@rase.org.uk

Web: www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk

(The Arthur Rank Centre is the churches' rural resources centre. It is a partnership between the Royal Agricultural Society of England, the Rank Foundation and the churches. It serves rural communities and their churches through innovation and development, information provision and advocacy. Through ecumenical networks of Rural Officers and Agricultural Chaplains the ARC has direct links with rural communities.)